

The Biggest Fish

The time was midnight. The place was lawyer James B. Donovan's temporary residence in Havana. The word came from Fidel Castro: "Meet me at Varadero Beach."

Accompanied by his 18-year-old son, John, a senior at Northwood High School in Lake Placid, N.Y., Donovan hustled over to a cabin at the beach. At 2:15 a.m., the Cuban dictator arrived. Exuberantly brandishing a long fishing spear, Castro announced: "This morning at 5:30 we go fishing. We go in search of the ladyfish—the biggest fish in the Caribbean." To John, Castro explained: "This is the law of nature. The tiny fish get eaten by the bigger fish. And the big fish eat them. But *all* the fish get eaten by the ladyfish."

Donovan cracked: "This is why we will all be Chinese in a few years."

"Donovan," said Castro (who pronounces it Don-a-wan), "I talk fishing, and you talk politics. We go to bed."

Castro turned to leave but had an afterthought: "Donovan, the Chinese are peace-loving people."

"Have you discussed this lately with the Indian Ambassador?" he asked.

"We go to bed," said Castro, and stalked out of the room.

Simpatia: That recent dialogue between Fidel Castro and James Donovan, the New York diplomat without portfolio, illustrates the strange rapport between the two men—a *simpatia* that resulted last week in the release of 27 Americans from Cuban prisons. In return, the U.S. gave up three Cubans indicted for espionage, and one man, Francisco (The Hook) Molina, who accidentally killed a Venezuelan girl in a café fracas during Castro's 1960 visit to the U.N. Afterward, loose-talking congressmen leaked the news that three Americans were actually CIA agents arrested in 1961 when they tried to hide a microphone in the office of the Chinese Communist press agency Hsinhua.

The successful swap—after some fifteen flying trips to Cuba—was the latest feather for Jim Donovan's hatband. A negotiator extraordinary, Donovan handled the exchange of Soviet spy Rudolph Abel for U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers, and the 1,163 Bay of Pigs invaders for \$53 million in U.S. drugs and food.

Back at his downtown New York law office after his latest coup, Donovan recounted some sidelights of the long negotiations to NEWSWEEK's Nancy Frazier. "Castro reads everything in the American press, and I'd have to explain all these stories when I'd get down there. I was there while some of the exile raids were taking place—hardly the most propitious time to negotiate."

It was to reassure the Cuban leader of his good faith that Donovan took along his son during the Easter school recess—"a gambit," says Donovan, "that someone in the State Department called the ultimate in gamesmanship. Castro took two days off from a busy schedule—he makes all the decisions in Cuba—and took us spear fishing and skin diving. He showed us the Bay of Pigs and described the invasion, how he deployed his troops and conducted the battle."

Sporting Life: One reason, perhaps, for his unique relationship with Castro, suggests Donovan, is that from most bona fide diplomats "Castro would hear either what their governments wanted him to hear or what they thought he wanted to hear. When he asked me something, I told him what I thought." But Castro liked to jaw with the talkative Irishman, dragging him to ball games, boxing matches, and the beach.

At one point, Donovan mentioned to Castro that as vice president of New York City's Board of Education, he had more Spanish-speaking students in his system than did Fidel. Castro roared with laughter. Another time, at the airport, Donovan watched a MIG fly by and needled the Lider Máximo: "Here comes the invasion."

During last week's trip to Cuba, Donovan said he saw stores stocking drugs labeled "Made in America," and heard that medicinal supplies were substantially aiding sick Cubans. "They are worth 50 Voice of America broadcasts," he said. "You could take that \$53 million and give it to American scientists, and give another \$53 million to Russian scientists, and all of them would not be able to create one human being."

What next for James Donovan—the only American that Fidel Castro currently seems to like or trust? Donovan hesitates to make forecasts. "I might have to go back. There are still thou-

sands of political prisoners there. I have gotten up a petition for their release."

But for the time being, says Donovan, "I want to put together the remnants of my law practice." First—on doctor's orders—he entered a hospital at the weekend for a long-needed rest.



Donovan with released Americans: After fishing with Fidel

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